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P & G Takes A Gamble

WRITTEN BY
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Mr. Clean has plans to clean up with prototype upscale carwash

PROCTOR & GAMBLE ALMOST SUCCEEDED IN ROLLING OUT THEIR NEWEST BRAND EXTENSION WITHOUT ANY FANFARE.

But a local reporter showed up at a sleepy zoning meeting in Deerfield, Ohio, a suburb north of Cincinnati. During the meeting, a business received zoning approval to build a full service carwash operation. What made that news was the size of the facility – an 8,900 square foot footprint – and the name of the business: Mr. Clean Performance Car Wash.

“That’s my job on this project - to keep this out of the press,” P&G spokesperson Glenn Williams admitted, trying hard to sit on any new nuggets of information.

It’s been tough. Associated Press jumped on the story and so did Business Week Magazine. “We wanted to keep it under the radar until we’d worked everything out. When P&G makes a move like this, people react,” sighed Mr. Williams. A career journalist who

became a statesmanlike public relations officer at P&G, he hadn’t yet prepared a press release about the project.

Mr. Clean, a hunky, follically-challenged, earring-wearing, compulsively clean sailor, is a long-serving brand character. He turned 49 last year.

The brand made a splash in the home carwash industry with Mr. Clean’s AutoDry in 2003, the same year it debuted Mr. Clean’s Magic Eraser. Reviews of the driveway wash product have largely been favorable and sales under the expanding Mr. Clean banner trebled the past five years to over \$400 million.

“The consumer is boss,” said Mr. Williams. “That’s our mantra, the foundation of everything we do at P&G. The consumer says there’s something untapped here.”

That something, P&G believes, is a high end, full service carwash.

In the works is a Mr. Clean in Deerfield that may be the prototype for a national carwash chain. Costing \$3.3 million to build, it would be used as a lab, giving company execs the chance to tweak the kinks before rolling it out on a larger scale.

The architects drawings show a carwash, located on Deerfield’s Mason-Montgomery Road, decorated throughout in Mr. Clean’s iconic blue-and-white color scheme. It will feature a conveyerized express exterior tunnel that is wider than most and set back from the observation windows for a better view. Children (or child-at-heart adults) will be able to shoot spurts of soapy foam and water at passing cars with “guns” mounted in the observation area.

The business will house a large lounge with big screen TV sets, a gift shop selling P&G products, and a coffee bar that sells P&G’s Millstone brand gourmet coffees.

The company will offer a full range of

(Left) Mr. Clean prototype car wash businesses in Cincinnati.

services “from exterior-only all the way to hand wax application.”

The target customer is mostly female, the spokesman said. “She’s a busy person, looking for a place to take a breath and sit back a bit. He’s betting this customer is willing to pay more for a sparkling clean car and that she’ll be impressed with the wash’s “green” operation. “The system we’re installing adheres to environmental standards from California, the toughest, most stringent in the U.S. 75% of the water is recycled and re-used. The rest is treated before being released into the environment.”

Groundbreaking is “eminent” and is expected to open within four months. A second operation is being planned for Evendale, Ohio, in the Evendale Commons Business Park.

“The Starbucks of car washes is not a bad analogy,” Mr. Williams laughed. “Just like all new businesses we get into, we’re trying to find an unfilled, un-met consumer need we could profitably address. The consumers we’ve interviewed in focus groups clearly told us three things.”

He proceeded to count them off.

“One, quality is important. A lot of carwashes “do” quality. A lot don’t. We’re going to offer the best available wash technology and chemicals. They’re not P&G products and there’s nothing exclusive about the formulations.

“Two, service. Some deliver terrific service, but a lot of them don’t. We’re offering Starbucks service, a comfortable place to be, a place where you can take a breath.

“Three, aesthetics. There are some beautiful car washes out there. Some in as nice an architectural setting as we are planning. However, we see very few washes that do all three things. When you add in the power of the Mr. Clean name, we think it will be a terrific combination.”

Mr. Williams sidestepped when asked if the new business would eventually become a franchise operation. He noted the Mr. Clean washes would initially be “company owned and operated. We’ll see how well the business model stands up before deciding our next step. The principle is, we’d be a solid community partner. We’ll launch with promotion and

advertising that will be replicable on a bigger scale.”

This was not an impulse move on P&G’s part. According to Mr. Williams, a “group here at P&G whose job is to identify new market opportunities has been working on this for over a year.”

If the concept takes off and the buzz goes, P&G might take Mr. Clean’s carwash nationwide.

Author and customer service professional Sheldon Bowles is impressed. “Wow! With a name like Mr. Clean and their marketing skills these folk could sell a deep freeze to Eskimos and make money doing it,” he enthused. “I’ve no idea if their concept is a good one, or not. But, if P&G is going for it I’d bet it is well researched, will be well funded, and has a good chance of success.”

R.L. “Bud” Abraham, owner of Detail Plus Care Appearance Systems has been building and selling washes worldwide for four decades. Three years ago, he opened his own carwash in Portland, Oregon. He’s not impressed with P&G’s plans.

“Good luck,” Mr. Abraham stated. He is not sure Mr. Clean will work either as a sole shop or a franchise. “One thing that is wrong with the P&G model is that it is full service. This will not work, I can

guarantee you, because the full service model is a thing of the past. Rising labor costs and all the inherent problems of hiring and managing labor is a problem. The exterior model is the only way for the industry to move and it is happening if you study the trends over the last five to six years.

“Every smart operator is building exterior washes,” Mr. Abraham opined, adding: “The carwash customer does not want gimmicks. They want a convenient, fast, high-quality, good service, reasonably priced car wash.”

Mr. Abraham continued: “People today are in a hurry. They do not want to get out of their cars. They do not want people in their cars.”

He asked rhetorically: “Am I a cynic?”

“Large corporations who come into the business have not done well. Why should P&G?”

Stay tuned.

Annapolis-based resident, Wendi Winters, is a freelance writer, public relations consultant and Manhattanite-in-exile. Currently writing for *The Capital* and *What’s Up Annapolis*, her articles have also been published by Associated Press, Copley News Service and many other publications.



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